

UCLA

Critical Planning

Title

In Memoriam: Edward W. Soja, 1940-2015

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1bx1t6q4>

Journal

Critical Planning, 22(1)

Author

Scott, Allen J.

Publication Date

2015

DOI

10.5070/CP8221029970

Copyright Information

Copyright 2015 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed



Edward W. Soja, 1940-2015
Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Urban Planning

In Memoriam

Edward W. Soja

1940-2015

Ed Soja died in the evening of Sunday November 1st, 2015, after an extended illness. His departure represents a huge loss to his many friends and colleagues both here in Los Angeles and all over the world. Ed was in every sense larger than life. He had an imposing physical presence and an enormous personality. He was also gifted with an extraordinarily fertile mind that took him persistently to the intellectual frontiers of geography, planning and social enquiry generally. His astonishing (one of Ed's favorite words) verbal capacities served him well not only in his written work, but also in his more direct interaction with others, from his inspired teaching to public debate. His way with words seemed to be virtually inexhaustible and sometimes, to be frank, a bit overpowering.

Over his long scholarly career, Ed produced a remarkable corpus of published work, as represented in particular by a series of highly influential books (see list at end) that seemed to appear with increasing frequency as he approached retire-

ment. Many of these were translated into foreign languages. At the time of his death he was working intensely on a new manuscript about the early historical origins of cities. His intellectual commitments evolved in various ways over the years, but they were always passionately focused on what he called “spatiality” or the dialectical and more latterly “trialectical” relations between geographic space, human society, and ideology. He experimented creatively and playfully with various theoretical approaches to these issues, including, most importantly, Marxism and postmodernism, but always in a highly idiosyncratic and imaginative way. Among the numerous original ideas that he teased out of these materials was the concept of “third space,” of which he was inordinately proud. Ed frequently told me that I had a tin ear in regard to his cherished triadic concepts so if he is reading these lines up there, he is probably already complaining that I got it wrong all over again.

Of course, a central substantive concern in Ed’s work was the city, and above all the development and character of Los Angeles and Southern California, a city and a region that occupied much of his attention over a period of thirty years and more. He was a leading light of the so-called LA School of Urban Studies that for a period in the 1980s and 1990s rose to international prominence as a major if controversial theoretical alternative to the then prevailing ideas of the Chicago School, and which offered an interpretation of the city as a postfordist (and in Ed’s later formulations, a postmodern) expression of capitalist social and economic relationships. In all of this work, Ed was ardently committed to issues of social justice and to the quest for urban planning practices that enlarged the democratic potentials of modern society and that fostered what Henri Lefebvre, one of his intellectual heroes, called the “right to the city.”

Ed’s influence on students and colleagues alike was enormous. Many of his Ph.D. students now occupy prominent academic positions in universities across North America and Europe. His scholarly impact is manifest in the continually expanding references to his work in the published papers and books of scholars from many different countries and diverse disciplines. Just a few weeks before his death he was awarded the Prix Vautrin Lud, an accolade that represents the highest formal international honor in the discipline of geography. I imagine that he must have felt profoundly gratified by this mark of recognition, though unfortunately he was unable to attend the award ceremony at Saint Dié des Vosges in France.

We shall all miss his assertive presence, and all the more so because he had still so much to say and to write. I personally am greatly saddened by his departure. While he and I shared a basic intellectual groundwork in common, we didn't always agree, and over the many years of our association we often argued furiously about our academic differences. I particularly regret that I will no longer have him as an intellectual sparring partner, even though I almost always lost. Above all, I miss him deeply not only as a friend but also as someone whose incredible honesty and steadfastness never faltered.

Allen J. Scott,

Distinguished Research Professor,
Department of Geography and Department of Policy Studies,
UCLA.

Selected publications of Ed Soja:

The Geography of Modernization in Kenya; a Spatial Analysis of Social, Economic, and Political Change. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1968.

The African Experience. Evanston : Northwestern University Press, 1970 (edited with J. N. Paden).

Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory. London: Verso, 1989.

The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996 (edited with A. J. Scott)

Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1996.

Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2000.

Seeking Spatial Justice. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

My Los Angeles: From Urban Restructuring to Regional Urbanization. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014.